

Teaching Cantonese Music in a Canadian University

HEDY LAW

Scholarship by ethnomusicologists on Cantonese Music (that is, any genre of vocal music with Cantonese or *Yue*-Chinese lyrics) often constitutes one module for an undergraduate course on “world music” in North America. But the curriculum I experienced as a student in British Hong Kong adopted a different model. I read the publications on Cantonese music published in the 1980s and 1990s when I took courses on transcribing Cantonese popular music, Chinese music, and Cantonese opera in the 1990s for my undergraduate music piano performance degree at a university in Hong Kong. These classes fulfilled the “Chinese music” degree requirements. Yet, at that time, I was completely unaware of the homogeneity of the student population in that university. Contrary to Daniel K.L. Chua, who calls himself a “living embodiment of globalization,” I did not know much about the world as an undergraduate student, not to mention any idea of globality.¹ Growing up in a middle-class Chinese family, I did not have the resources to travel beyond Southeast Asia until I pursued my postgraduate studies in the United Kingdom and, later, in the United States. Most of the literature I studied as a student follows a clear intellectual lineage based heavily on the work of Bell Yung and his students. Most of these scholars were from Hong Kong or had familial roots there, and most research focuses on the city of Hong Kong. While Siu-Wah Yu and Bell Yung have since explored Cantonese music beyond Hong Kong by tracing performances in Macau, Guangzhou, and the United States, scholars before the 2010s often positioned Hong Kong as the center of Cantonese music.²

1. Daniel K.L. Chua, “Global Musicology: A Keynote without a Key,” *Acta musicologica* 94, no. 1 (2022): 121.

2. On an overview of genres of narrative song, see Bell Yung, “Narrative Song: Southern Traditions—Cantonese Narrative Song,” in *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, 10 vols., volume 7: East Asia: China, Japan, and Korea, eds. Robert C. Provine, Yosihiko Tokumaru, and J. Lawrence Witzleben (New York: Garland, 2001), 267–273; on the transmission of the narrative song from Guangzhou to Hong Kong, see Yung, “Voices of Hong Kong: The Reconstruction of a Performance in a Teahouse,” *Critical Zone* 3 (2009): 37–56; on the narrative song in Macau, see Siu-Wah Yu, “Ng Wing Mui (Mui Yee) and the Revival of Sineung (Blind Female) Singing Style in Cantonese Naamyam (Southern Tone),” *Chinoperl: Journal of Chinese Oral and*

When I started to teach the course Cantonese Music at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 2020 and 2022, I felt the need to situate Hong Kong within a wider context of the global Sinophone sphere. UBC is North America's most international university since 2020³ and the Asian-dominated demographic of my class helped me realize that the Hong Kong-centric scholarship that I had read in the past had little relevance to my students who know little about Hong Kong. So I prioritized their interests and lived experiences, and explored ways to make elements of Cantonese music relatable. With an emphasis on music with Cantonese lyrics within the global Sinophone sphere, my course invited students to explore Cantonese music not only in the local and regional contexts of Hong Kong and Guangdong, but more broadly in Asian, Southeast Asian, Canadian, and American contexts.⁴ In other words, my course had become a "global Cantonese music" one because, to borrow Chua's formulation, "globalization happens to people."⁵

This pedagogical reorientation from a "world music" class focused on Hong Kong to a "global music history" class that addressed a Cantonese diasporic practice aligned with UBC's global strategy. This shift allowed me to emphasize Nancy Rao's 2017 book *Chinese Theatre in North America* and her 2020 article on Cantonese opera in Shanghai and San Francisco, as these readings, unlike the Hong Kong-centric studies of Cantonese music, situate Cantonese music in the transpacific circulatory network.⁶ Rao's research raises new questions on global port history, transpacific music history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the racist impact of the Canadian "Chinese Immigration Act" of 1923 on Canadian Chinese communities. As she argues in her article in this special issue, the material objects preserved in archives in multiple nations allow researchers to piece together an imaginary mega-archive from numerous sources scattered around physical archives, museums, and private collections. Her reimagining of a multi-locational archive for global music history

Performing Literature 33, no. 2 (2014): 121–134; on a kind of narrative song called Muk'yu sung in Toishanese dialect of Cantonese, see Bell Yung and Eleanor S. Yung, eds., *Uncle Ng Comes to America: Chinese Narrative Songs of Immigration and Love* (Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, 2014).

3. "Times Higher Education (THE) Student: Most International Universities in the World," last modified January 19, 2022, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/most-international-universities-world>.

4. On Sinophone studies, see Shu-Mei Shih, "The Concept of the Sinophone," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (May 2022): 709–718; Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production," in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, eds. Shu-mei Shih, Chien-Hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernard (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013): 25–42.

5. Chua, "Global Musicology," 121.

6. Nancy Yunhwa Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Rao, "Li Xuefang Meets Mei Lanfang: Cantonese Opera's Significant Rise in 1920s Shanghai and Beyond," *Chinoperl: Journal of Chinese Oral and Performance Literature* 39, no. 2 (2020): 151–181.

research allowed her to think beyond musical orientalism in North America in order to reconstruct a history of Cantonese opera in Chinese-American history in the early twentieth century that has remained largely invisible.⁷ Inspired by her research, I realized that the purpose of teaching Cantonese music in a global context should not be about celebrating globalization in the ways sociologists and global studies scholars did in the 1990s and 2000s; rather, the goal is to ask new questions about mobility and connectivity while reconstructing histories that have been absent in the epistemology of musical knowledge.

At the same time, scholars on global music history (under various rubrics including "the global history of music" and "global musicology") began to understand music and language in broad, comparative terms. In this context, the topic of Cantonese music is no longer a token in a World Music survey course, but an example of a type of music generated by a language system called "tone language" (also known in some literature as "tonal language"). While "tone language" is a topic in linguistics—a discipline customarily kept separate from music in undergraduate music history curriculum—a global historical approach emphasizing connections across cultures and naturally brings together the domains of language and music. This emphasis is evidenced by a chapter by a linguist on the relationship between tone and melody in tone languages, which was included in a 2021 collection of essays on global music history, edited by musicologist Reinhard Strohm.⁸ Music theorists are devising analytical techniques that explain melodic properties in musical genres sung in tone languages.⁹ To be sure, these new studies are in the nascent stage, but I propose in this article that the linguistic tones of Cantonese language are a foundation for generating melody. This understanding of melody as a derivative of a series of vocal inflections conditioned by a linguistic property integral to the language of Cantonese song enables a comparison in contrast to European art music traditions in non-tone languages such as Italian, French, German, Spanish, and English.

In this article I first discuss one concept developed in globalization study—called "disembodied globalization"—by reflecting upon the creation of the

7. On musical orientalism in studies of American music, see Charles Hiroshi Garrett, "Chinatown, Whose Chinatown? Defining America's Borders with Musical Orientalism," in *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 121–164; W. Anthony Sheppard, *Extreme Exoticism: Japan in the American Musical Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), especially chapter 4, "Two Paradigmatic Tales, between Genres and Genders," 150–196.

8. See James Kirby, "Towards a Comparative History of Tonal Text-Setting Practices in South East Asia," in *Transcultural Music History: Global Participation and Regional Diversity in the Modern Age*, ed. Reinhard Strohm (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 2021), 291–313.

9. See, for example, Anna Yu Wang, "Intuitions and Musicalities: Theory, Analysis, and Ethnography across Two Sinitic Opera Traditions," (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2023).

Cantopop song “相擁風雨中” (“Rain Before Sunshine”) with lyrics produced by a student as a pedagogical exercise. I argue that the production of this song in May–July 2020 in Canada exemplifies the globalization of Cantonese music. However, I also explain why the global (read: transnational, transregional, and trans-continental) release of the song on Apple Music and Spotify for North American listeners, YouTube for those who have access to Google, and the SONY-affiliated apps MOOV, KKBOX, and JOOX for Asian and South-East Asian subscribers prompted the re-localizing and re-nationalizing of its content.¹⁰

Teaching Cantonese Linguistic Tones

The course “Cantonese Music” takes a language-oriented approach that places a strong emphasis on the linguistic tones of the Cantonese language. This approach places the course within the broader discipline of Sinophone studies while cutting across traditional sub-disciplinary boundaries that separate ethnomusicology, musicology, and music theory.¹¹ With the focus on language, I assign readings on Cantonese opera, traditional narrative songs, and Cantopop while charting a conceptual domain broad enough to include all musical genres with Cantonese lyrics, including rap, Cantonese choral art music, Cantonese jazz choral music, and Cantonese musicals. Based on research on the Cantonese language by linguists and the ecology of language by sociolinguists, the course uses Cantonese as a linguistic affordance for rethinking the roles of music in the formation of a global Cantophone community.¹² Thus, the course design differs in aims and purposes from genre- or place-specific courses such as “Chinese Music,” or “Cantonese Opera,” “Music in Hong Kong,” or “Music in China” that are offered in some universities to fulfill “world music” requirements in undergraduate curricula.

10. “相擁風雨中 (Rain Before Sunshine),” Cantonese UBC, released July 22, 2020, video, 4:04, accessed July 17, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9qPLOMBhhU>. Note that the word “region” has a meaning specific to Apple Music. This song was released in the North American “region” of Apple Music, which is region-locked.

11. Cantonese is the language of 85.6 million people worldwide in 2022, with more than 73.3 million users in China in 2019. The figures are published in “Chinese, Yue,” in David M. Eberhard, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig, eds., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 25th ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2022), online version accessed July 18, 2022, <http://www.ethnologue.com>.

12. On an authoritative study of the Cantonese language, see Stephen Matthews and Virginia Yip, *Cantonese: A Comprehensive Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2011); on the evolution of Cantonese, see Umberto Ansaldò, *Contact Languages: Ecology and Evolution in Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); on the Cantophone as a designation of Cantonese users, see Klavier J. Wang, *Hong Kong Popular Music: Worlding Film, Television, and Pop Music* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 155.

My language-centered music course has three objectives. The primary objective is to teach students the basic linguistic properties of Cantonese, notably the linguistic tones and semantic permutations they facilitate. The second objective is to introduce students to the major music genres with Cantonese lyrics, including recent and little-studied genres such as Cantonese choral music and Cantonese musicals. The third objective is to introduce students to the most recent research on Cantonese music, including Cantonese opera between World War I and World War II in the transpacific network.¹³ To achieve the first objective, I explain how modern tone languages such as Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Thai, and Zulu are linguistically different from non-tone languages in the Indo-European language family, including English, French, German, Italian, Latin, and Spanish, which are the primary languages represented in the tenth edition of *A History of Western Music*.¹⁴

My Cantonese Music class in 2020 included international students from Hong Kong and China, but also a Korean-Canadian, an Indian-Canadian, and an Iranian-Canadian, immigrants from East and Southeast Asia, plus zero-, first-, and second-generation Chinese heritage speakers who barely understand any Chinese languages or dialects, but feel obligated to understand their ethnicity and the ongoing and omnipresent anti-Asian racism in their daily lives.¹⁵ The student demographic in the course shaped the pedagogical approach to the course, which means that I had to create an inclusive pedagogical environment that enabled a heterogeneous student group to understand the course materials, most of which have been written for a homogeneous audience already proficient in Cantonese. The most challenging aspect is to teach the fundamentals of tone language, which is difficult for most students. The Cantonese-speaking students—from Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Macau, heritage Canadian-Chinese who speak Cantonese at home—had not learned the theory of linguistic tones. Some knew how to speak the language but did not know how to theorize the sound of Cantonese, not to mention how to understand the correlation between the tonal contour formed by linguistic tones of the lyrics and the

13. Nancy Yunhwa Rao, “Cantonese Opera in Turn-of-the-Century-Canada: Local History and Transnational Circulation,” *19th Century Music Review* 11, no. 2 (2014): 291–310. See also Yvonne Liao’s thought-provoking review of Rao’s *Chinatown Opera Theatre in North America*, “Review Article: ‘Chinatown’ and Global Operatic Knowledge,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 31, nos. 2–3 (2019): 280–290.

14. On select tone languages and their respective correlations with melody, see Murray Schellenberg, “Does Language Determine Music in Tone Languages?” *Ethnomusicology* 56, no. 2 (2012): 266–278.

15. The twenty-five students who took my course in 2022 formed an even more diverse group, with Caucasian students from Europe and the United States, students from different regions of China, East and Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong who majored in science, engineering, psychology, architecture, statistics, management, and global supply chain and logistics in addition to music and Asian Studies.

melody.¹⁶ Students who did not understand the basics of tone language had to learn the fundamentals of the tone language system, in contradistinction to the non-tone language system that forms the staple of the art music curriculum in universities and conservatories. What kinds of pedagogical methods could help both Cantonese-speaking and non-Cantonese-speaking students understand the relationship between a tone language and music?

Research on Cantonese opera provides a critical resource for explaining the tonal property of Cantonese and its correlation with music. Bell Yung's three articles on Cantonese opera, published in three consecutive issues in the journal *Ethnomusicology* in 1983 provide the foundation for theorizing the correlation between Cantonese linguistic tones and melody. His 1989 book on Cantonese opera, which is still the definitive study of Cantonese opera, elaborates his observations by conceptualizing the correlation between speech and melody in terms of a continuum, and not a binary opposition.¹⁷ This body of work has been furthered by later publications, such as Sau-Yan Chan's book on improvisation and the performance of Cantonese opera and Siu-Wah Yu's transcription of naamyam (a genre of narrative song sung in Cantonese). Linguist Murray Schellenberg's work contributes to this discourse by comparing and contrasting Cantonese with other tone languages. His 2012 article, also published in *Ethnomusicology*, places the tone language of Cantonese within a broader intellectual inquiry of all the major tone languages. Edwin Li's 2021 article, published in *Music Theory Online*, takes the studies of Cantonese linguistic tones to the perceptual level.¹⁸ These publications are crucial to understand the linguistic tones of Cantonese as the basis for all genres of music with Cantonese lyrics.

Recent linguistic research on Cantonese makes it possible for students to learn the Cantonese tones within a theoretically coherent and rigorous framework. The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong standardized a romanization

16. For a recent discussion of this topic, see Lian-Hee Wee, *Phonological Tone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 249–264; William Choi, “The Selectivity of Musical Advantage: Musicians Exhibit Perceptual Advantage for Some but Not All Cantonese Tones,” *Music Perception* 37, no. 5 (2020): 423–434; Edwin K.C. Li, “Cantopop and Speech-Melody Complex,” *Music Theory Online* 27, no. 1 (March 2021), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.21.27.1/mto.21.27.1.li.html#FNOREF>.

17. See Bell Yung, “Creative Process in Cantonese Opera I: The Role of Linguistic Tones,” *Ethnomusicology* 27, no. 1 (1983): 29–47; Yung, “Creative Process in Cantonese Opera II: The Process of T'ien Tz'u (Text-Setting),” *Ethnomusicology* 27, no. 2 (1983): 297–318; Yung, “Creative Process in Cantonese Opera III: The Role of Padding Syllables,” *Ethnomusicology* 27, no. 3 (1983): 439–456; Yung, *Cantonese Opera: Performance as Creative Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For the continuum, see Figure 13.2 published in Yung, *Cantonese Opera*, 151.

18. See Sau-Yan Chan, *Improvisation in a Ritual Context: The Music of Cantonese Opera* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1991); for Yu's transcription, see, n.2; for Schellenberg's article, see, n.11; for Li's article, see, n.13.

scheme of Cantonese called “Jyutping” in 1993, with the latest revision in 2022. This scheme has made it possible for students to understand the linguistic tones systematically even though they do not speak Cantonese, although some students can read Chinese characters. Each character includes sonic components (“onset,” “nuclei,” and “coda,”) and “syllabic nasal” sounds. But the most critical part of this system is that it facilitates a study of the six theoretical tones for each syllable. A numerical “tone mark,” ranging from 1 to 6, indicates the lexical tone of each romanization. As seen in Table 1, Tone 1 is the highest tone while tone 4 is the lowest one. Tone 3 is the second highest tone and Tone 6 comes between Tone 3 and Tone 4. Tones 2 and 5 belong to the category of “rising tones,” which means the “coda” of Tone 2 rises from the middle register to the tonal plane as high as Tone 1, while that of Tone 5 rises from the low register to the middle register. In this scheme, all six tones are distinct. Each syllable has six theoretically viable tones, although not all of these theoretical permutations correlate to real characters.¹⁹

	Matthews and Yip (2011)	Yung (1983)	Jyutping (1993, 2018)
High level	55	Upper even 53 or 55	1
High rising	25	Upper rising 35	2
	high level ending with an unreleased sound	Upper entering 5 [or 50]	high level tone ends with -p, -k, or -t
Mid level	33	Upper going 33	3
	mid level ending with an unreleased sound	Middle entering 3 [or 30]	mid level tone ends with -p, -k, -t
Low falling	21 or 11	Lower even 21	4
Low rising	23	Lower rising 23	5
Low level	22	Lower going 22	6
	low level ending with an unreleased sound	Lower entering 2 [or 20]	low level tone ends with -p, -k, -t

Table 1: Comparison of three romanization schemes of the Cantonese language²⁰

The standardization of the Jyutping romanization system enables teaching and research on a systematic level, especially for undergraduate students who

19. Jyutping Cantonese Romanization Scheme,” The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://lshk.org/jyutping-scheme/>.

20. I show in Table 1 three schemes of Cantonese tones. They come from three sources, each is authoritative for its audience. The column marked “Matthew and Yip (2011)” offers a summary of their discussion of the Cantonese “basic tones” for linguistics. See Stephen Matthews

have little or no Chinese proficiency. This system makes it possible for all students to transliterate a Chinese character into numbers that enable empirical analyses. Free online converters such as “Cantonese Tools” provide fast and sufficiently accurate references. For students who read Chinese, the Chinese-English bilingual “Multi-function Chinese Character Database” offers a helpful search engine to date for thorough research of each character, including homonyms, etymology, multiple pronunciations of the same character, and cross-references to the Mandarin Pinyin system.²¹ Robert S. Bauer’s *ABC Cantonese-English Comprehensive Dictionary* offers the most authoritative bilingual lexical reference.²² Students obtain the romanization of each character by cutting and pasting each Chinese character from a text to an online converter.

These online resources are especially useful for teaching Cantonese music because Cantonese songs such as Cantopop are in song form. Words or verses are often repeated to give a sense of structure and coherence. Each song of about four-and-a-half minutes typically consists of about two hundred characters. This scope makes a song a manageable unit of study for students who do not know any Chinese.

Some scholars, such as Bell Yung and Edwin Li take into account a category of characters with the finals of “-p,” “-t,” and “-k” in their romanization presentations. These finals make an effect of a sound that stops abruptly. They impose a *staccato* articulation on the pronunciation of these characters. These finals belong to the category called “entering tone” (*Rusheng* or “入聲”). Yet, since these syllables distinguish themselves by the stopped sound of their finals—as if an otherwise sustained sound were cut short abruptly—rather than tones other than the six described above, the concept of “entering tone” is a misnomer because these three finals do not present three tones in terms of pitch level or contour additional to the six-tone range. The “entering tone” generates an articulation-based rather than pitch- or contour- based phonic difference.²³

and Virginia Yip, *Cantonese: A Comprehensive Grammar*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 28–29. The column, “Yung (1983),” summarizes the theory of Cantonese linguistic tones that Yung wrote for the field of Ethnomusicology. See Yung, “Creative Process in Cantonese Opera I,” 30. Contents presented in the column “Juypting (1993, 2018)” for the general public are compiled from Section 3 “Coda 韻尾” and Section 5 “Tone 字調” of The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong Cantonese Romanization Scheme, last modified March 5, 2023, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://lshk.org/jyutping-scheme/>.

21. “Multi-function Chinese Character Database,” Research Centre for Humanities Computing, CUHK, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Lexis/lexi-mf/>. This is a free, scholarly, online tool and it was last updated in 2018 by the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

22. Robert S. Bauer, *ABC Cantonese-English Comprehensive Dictionary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2021).

23. On *rusheng*, see Marjorie K.M. Chan and Jocelyn Chey, “‘Love You to the Bone’ and Other Songs: Humor and *Rusheng* Rhymes in Early Cantopop,” in *Humor in Chinese Life and*

Researchers in the 1980s–2000s often describe Cantonese as a language with nine tones while linguists in the 2010s and 2020s concur on the six-tone theory (for comparison of three schemes from 1980s through 2010s, see Table 1). At present, most linguists use the six-tone system, but music scholars such as Li still prefer the nine-tone system in their research.

Cantonese Lyrics Competition as a Pedagogical Tool

To further help students understand the relationship between the Cantonese language and music, I helped organize the Cantonese lyrics competition in 2020 and garnered support from various UBC units, namely the School of Music, the Hong Kong Studies Initiative, the Cantonese Language Program, and the Department of Asian Studies. The idea of a Cantonese Lyrics Competition came from the changing COVID-19 policies that mandated compliance with changing physical distancing protocols in early 2020, about halfway through the course. In late March 2020, Raymond Pai, Lecturer and Coordinator of the Cantonese Language Program at the University of British Columbia introduced me to Chris Ho, a professional musician who had worked in the Cantopop music business in Hong Kong in various capacities (as arranger, producer, composer, artists’ manager, etc.). In mid-March 2020, as the pandemic unfolded in Canada, Ho proposed a Cantonese Lyrics Competition that did not require much physical contact. Thus, the idea of this competition was conceived to be “disembodied” from the outset.

As the disembodied nature of the competition was the practical and necessary feature, Ho’s idea was to allow students to write original lyrics for a Cantopop melody from an original “demo”—an unpolished MIDI file of a song that consists of the melody, the form, and basic accompaniment outlining harmonies—that Ho had already composed and to ask students to write lyrics for it. The winner’s song would be sung, recorded, produced by industry professionals, and released on the commercial platforms mentioned above. This method, called “from melody to lyrics” (“先曲後詞”) is the standard method for producing a Cantopop song. (The alternative, “from lyrics to melody” (“先詞後曲”) is uncommon for Cantopop although it was used occasionally by experienced composers and lyricists for special effects). To make the competition relevant to students’ life, our organizing team decided to call this competition “Combating COVID-19” and asked students to come up with lyrics relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic that was unfolding across the world.²⁴

Culture: Resistance and Control in Modern Times, eds. Jessica Milner Davis and Jocelyn Chey (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 103–130.

24. The global pandemic lockdown was an important factor that defined the content of the songs, the creative process, the production process, and the release and promotion of the

The preliminary plan was to have students submit their lyrics by April 30, 2020. Pai asked three of the top industry professionals—Yihing Ong, Mini Choi, and Chris Shum—to serve as adjudicators. Ong and Choi were in Vancouver, and Shum was in Hong Kong, but the geographically separated team did not pose any problem since their judgment of the lyrics and the demo did not require in-person contact. About 360 UBC students who were taking courses relevant to Cantonese language were notified, and the students who took my Cantonese Music course could use their lyrics to earn extra credits for the course. Twenty students entered the competition and five became finalists. Remarkably, all applicants struggled with fitting the right characters to the right melody. The winner was Emily Liang, a Canadian-Chinese third-year UBC Bachelor of Arts music student whose mother tongue is Cantonese. With the lyrics “Rain Before Shine” Liang made the fewest mistakes in correlating linguistic tones and the demo tune. Her lyrics—about a frontline nurse saying goodbye to her lover the day before she volunteers to care for COVID-19 patients—suited the theme of the competition. Although students learn the basics of linguistic tones in their classes, most of them realized the difficulty of fitting Cantonese lyrics to a pre-existing melody. It was the sounds of the Cantonese linguistic tones that posed the greatest challenge for the competitors.

After the winner was announced May 17, 2020, the song entered the production phase. Chris Ho—composer of the tune and producer of the song—first worked with Liang in finalizing the lyrics, making sure that the resulting lyrics met the Cantopop industry standard: characters whose linguistic tones did not match the melody of the demo were modified; un-idiomatic vocabularies were replaced; lines were revised for flow. After this stage, Ho asked one of the singers in his agency, nicknamed “Ashia,” to record this song. Ashia was an appropriate choice because she was a licensed and practicing professional clinical psychologist in Hong Kong who sang in her spare time. The rendition of this song by a practicing health-care professional reinforces the song’s gratitude to front-line healthcare professionals. The recording session took place in Hong Kong, which was the only step in the entire creation-production-release process that involved some degree of in-person contact.

The global release of the song on July 22, 2020, drew the attention of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) producer who had already been

Cantonese Lyrics Competition. In late March of 2020, COVID-19 cases were surging in Canada and we knew that the pandemic would not subside by the time the song came out, in the summer of 2020. What we did not know, however, was the scale of the pandemic, and how protracted it would turn out to be. As of July 12, 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing, with more than 557 million cases worldwide. The figure of 557,267,528 total cases worldwide is obtained from the “COVID-19 Dashboard” maintained by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University, accessed on July 12, 2022, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

collecting information about this competition from April 2020. Consequently, Emily and I were interviewed by journalist Gloria Macarenko on CBC Radio on July 24, 2020, and a summary of the interview was published on the CBC website the day after.²⁵ Crucially this interview relocalized the song for the Canadian audience, stressing the pedagogical value of teaching Cantonese music in Canada. Our interview emphasized the purpose of the Cantonese Lyrics Competition, namely, to create a Cantonese popular song in Canada without much physical contact during the pandemic lockdown and to recognize the efforts of front-line health-care workers. For CBC Radio, the cross-national globality of the song was consistent with Canadian multiculturalism.

Toward Global Cantonese Music

Given the cross-continental production process of this song, it is appropriate to frame the making of “Rain Before Sunshine” within the concept of “disembodied globalization,” a term coined by sociologist Manfred Steger and social theorist Paul James in 2019 in light of the McKinsey report published in March 2016 on cross-border global flows and digital globalization.²⁶ The concept of “disembodied globalization” stems from “embodied globalization,” which means the “movement of peoples across the world.” “Disembodied globalization,” by contrast, means “the extension of social relations through the movement of immaterial things and processes, including words, images, electronic texts, and encoded capital such as cryptocurrencies.”²⁷ The case study of “Rain Before Sunshine” illustrates “disembodied globalization” by showing how the song was assembled primarily digitally through multiple stages of production in Hong Kong, the United States, and Canada. Spearheaded by immigrants—myself, Chris Ho, and Raymond Pai, and Liang (a Chinese-Canadian speaker born in Canada who has no connection to Hong Kong but studied for a few years in Guangzhou), the globalized production team de-territorialized Cantopop, making Hong Kong one of its production sites rather than its center or its sole destination.

25. For an article on this CBC interview, see Roshini Nair, “Cantopop Ballad with COVID-19 Twist Co-written by UBC Contest Winner,” *British Columbia, CBC News*, July 25, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/cantopop-ubc-covid-19-1.5662917>.

26. McKinsey Global Institute, *Digital Globalization: The New Era of Global Flows* (n.p.: McKinsey & Company, 2016), esp. chs.1 and 4.

27. Manfred B. Steger and Paul James, *Globalization Matters: Engaging the Global in Unsettled Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 122.

Comparing Cantonese Music with Recitative

My experience of teaching Cantonese music in a School of Music environment helps me to reflect upon more broadly the relationship between “world music” and the traditional music history curriculum. In my teaching of Cantonese music, I frequently used recitative in the Western art music tradition as a reference, as it serves as the closest musical common denominator that brings together language and music for upper-level music undergraduate majors—regardless of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. But I also realized that the characteristics of Cantonese music can help explain certain aspects of Western art music.

In my history survey course on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music, students learn some speech-like musical components in vocal music genres: recitative in Italian and French opera, spoken dialogue in English ballad opera, *Singspiel*, and *opéra comique*. These components are explained in *A History of Western Music (HWM)* as fundamentals of vocal music in these two centuries.²⁸ Recitative, in particular, is defined in the Glossary of *HWM* as “as passage or section in an opera, oratorio, cantata, or other vocal work in recitative style.” Recitative style (or *stile recitativo* in Italian) means “a type of vocal singing that approaches speech and follows the natural rhythms of the text.”²⁹ It is the opposite of “aria” and “arioso,” both of which are lyrical although the form of “arioso” is freer than aria.³⁰ Thus, *HWM* presents the antithesis between recitative and aria in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century vocal genres, including in the solo madrigal (e.g., *NAWM* 72, Giulio Caccini’s “Vedrò ‘l mio solo” [ca. 1590]), opera (and opera-like genres such as ballet) (e.g., *NAWM* 73, Jacopo Peri, *Le musiche sopra l’Euridice* [1600]), cantata (e.g., *NAWM* 77, Barbara Strozzi’s “Lagrime mie” [1650]), and oratorio (*NAWM* 80, Giacomo Carissimi, *Historia di Jephthè: Conclusion* [ca. 1648]). This speech-versus-aria notion of lyricism also carries implications for vocally conceived instrumental genres such as Biagio Marini’s *Sonata IV per il violini per sonar con due corde* (ca.1655) (*NAWM* 84), Prelude No. 8 in E-flat Minor of Book I of J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* (*NAWM* 104), C.P.E. Bach’s *Empfindsamer Stil* in the second movement of his *Sonata in A major*, H. 186, Wq. 55/4 (1765) (*NAWM* 117), and the first movement of Mozart’s *Piano Sonata in F Major*, K. 332 (1781–1783) (*NAWM* 124), to name a few. Yet, unfortunately, there are few published studies on the

teaching of recitative or other speech-based musical components in music history pedagogy.³¹

Using Cantonese music as a reference point in a music history survey would require the instructor to point out tone language and non-tone language as two language systems. The instructor does not need to speak any tone language, but they would need to acknowledge that all vocal pieces in *HWM* use non-tone languages. This basic level of acknowledgement delimits vocal music composed in the Western traditions while inviting students interested in language and music to investigate multilingual compositions such as Tan Dun’s opera *First Emperor* (2006, with lyrics by Ha Jin and Tan Dun). Beyond this basic level, the instructor may explain that a tone language *generates* a melody based on its linguistic tonal contour. Hence, speech in tone language is not the *opposite* of lyricism, as presented in *HWM*, but rather the *ground* of lyricism. By contrast, a non-tone language does not generate any melody because its linguistic property makes no demand on vocal inflections. On this level of comparison, Monteverdi’s use of repeated notes in his “excited” vocal delivery style (*stile concitato*) would serve as an excellent example for comparison.³² In a tone language, such use of repeated notes for a melody would require deliberate compositional effort, as the lyrics would have to be chosen specially to create an unusually flat linguistic tonal surface for a musical effect. For example, in the first movement “Farewell” in the Cantonese choral suite *Requiem HK* (2017), the Hong Kong composer Yin Ng composed a flat melody line on the basis of the repeated notes of two characters “再見,” both of the same tone (Tone 3). The flat melodic line in Monteverdi’s *stile concitato* and Ng’s “Farewell” shares the same musical property but they represent speech-like vocal components in two different language systems.

Conclusion

What I have learned from teaching Cantonese music at UBC can be understood as lessons in music history pedagogy beyond simple tokenism.³³ The diversity of the student body may enable students to reframe the course materials in positional terms relative to the global, hyperconnected environment they

28. Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, esp. 302–305.

29. Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca, A15.

30. Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca, A1.

31. No article published in the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* to date addresses the topic of teaching recitative. Nor is this topic mentioned in C. Matthew Balensuela, ed., *The Norton Guide to Teaching Music History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019). There is, however, published scholarship on recitative in vocal pedagogy. For example, Pamela H. Pilch and Christopher Arneson, “Using Recitative to Teach Expressive Singing: An Old Idea Made New,” *Journal of Singing* 75, no. 1 (September/October 2018): 25–31.

32. Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 307–308.

33. See Alejandro L. Madrid, “Diversity, Tokenism, Non-Canonical Musics, and the Crisis of the Humanities in U.S. Academia,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 7, no. 2 (2017): 124–130.

understand. A major learning outcome specific to the Cantonese music course is that students used Cantonese music as a topic at the margins of the music curriculum to understand the foundation of vocal music in non-tone languages in Western art music. Other learning outcomes include developing comparative skillsets to understand musical traditions in tone and non-tone languages; the problems of essentializing Western and non-Western music epistemologies and cultures; the mistake of pigeonholing all genres of Cantonese music as “non-Western.” The language-based design of this Cantonese music course enables students to rethink the rudiment of “melody” more critically, providing them with a case study for understanding the Western art music terminologies from a cross-cultural perspective.

Importantly, most students do not have the epistemological frameworks to understand the categories of “Western” and “non-Western” music, not to mention the colonial burdens these categories have long imposed upon our music curriculum. The Cantonese lyrics do not typically sound like a cultural difference to most non-Cantonese speakers, as long as harmony, melody, rhythm, texture, and form in the song follow the compositional rules of Western art music. Yet, as Strohm remarks, this appearance of non-difference in fact comes from the effort of modern composers of tone languages, who “have long learned to accommodate themselves to a sound system established in the language itself.”³⁴ Sidestepping the labels of “Western” and “non-Western” that may encourage a binary type of thinking, I emphasize instead the impact of tone and non-tone languages on melody in Western and Cantonese music traditions. Consequently, I adopt a comparative approach for all the students who took my course.

There are two broader kinds of outcomes in my language-based approach. The course outcome is to teach students the content that specialists consider central to Cantonese music. Another outcome derived from the course outcome is relational, for it allows Chinese Canadian students to relate more deeply to their parents and grandparents who came to Canada as immigrants and Chinese diaspora communities.³⁵ This relational outcome also enables all course participants to position ourselves as globalized agents in today’s musical world, who participate in the relocalization—and, in some cases, even renationalization—of teaching materials that have already been circulating globally.

34. Reinhard Strohm, “Media and Transcultural Music History,” in *Transcultural Music History: Global Participation and Regional Diversity in the Modern Age*, ed. Reinhard Strohm (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 2021), 289.

35. On the teaching of multiple epistemologies, see Dylan Robinson, “To All Who Should Be Concerned,” *Intersections* 39, no. 1 (2019): 137–144, at 139–140.